

MR. ZANUCK'S "GENTLEMAN'S AGREEMENT"

Reflections on Hollywood's Second Film About Anti-Semitism

ELLIOT E. COHEN

LIFE being what it is, last year's publicity out of Hollywood to the effect that Twentieth Century-Fox was "lavishing its all" on its super-production of *Gentleman's Agreement* could not help but arouse a certain apprehensiveness. In Mr. Zanuck's wizard hands was one of the great human issues of our time. Almost inevitably, some felt, there would emerge from the Hollywood belt line another huge purring strato-liner of a film, in whose chromium-bright hollow interior we would be sky-borne, passive as packages, to be redeposited two hours later quite untouched, and only a little air-sick.

It is a pleasure to report that for once in a lifetime Mr. Zanuck is even better than his billing. The plain fact is that *Gentleman's Agreement* is a moving, thought-provoking film, which dramatically brings home the question of anti-Semitism to precisely those people whose insight is most needed—decent, average Americans. In honesty and reality, it is immensely superior to a film like *The Best Years of Our Lives*, Hollywood's machine-made slicky on postwar GI problems. If there is any justice, it should win at least half as many Oscars.

CROSSFIRE was the first, *Gentleman's Agreement* is the second in Hollywood's film cycle against anti-Semitism to reach the nation's screens. ELLIOT E. COHEN wrote the "Letter to the Movie Makers" published in the August COMMENTARY, in which he offered some reflections on the potential of *Crossfire*, and of the film medium generally, for fighting prejudice. In this article Mr. Cohen appraises *Gentleman's Agreement*, and speculates on the uses and limitations of present-day propaganda for democratic causes. Mr. Cohen is editor of this magazine. Perhaps we should mention that he is here expressing his own views, which are in no sense official.

Gentleman's Agreement is neither streamlined nor glib. As a matter of fact, in its beginnings it is awkward and groping, like an earnest, unpracticed speaker struggling with a complex subject. But this is not altogether inappropriate: we are going to look at that curious, archaic aberration, anti-Semitism—as it exists not in darkest Naziland, nor among our own lunatic fringe, but among Americans of good will—the nice lady in the next seat—yes, one suspects uneasily, even oneself.

Mercifully stripped of Laura Z. Hobson's modish, schoolgirl prose, the story has a parable quality. The crusading young writer from the West is struggling unhappily with his first big assignment on a great national weekly—a smashing series on anti-Semitism. His wife is dead; he has a little boy; his mother keeps house for them; and then there is the girl, the magazine publisher's niece, a bit of an intellectual, recently divorced, beautiful, very Sutton Place—and liberal!

Then, so as to come closer to the actual feel of anti-Semitism, Phil decides to masquerade as a Jew. Undeniably creaky in the novel, on the screen this device instantly unlocks drama, as such devices have done for centuries on the stage. Moreover, the device has a precise aptness here—for anti-Semitism is always false identity, the hallucinatory identification of flesh-and-blood Jews with that centuries-old myth of the Western world: the somehow-sinister Yid.

Because it can happen even to the Gentile Phil, we see that Jews have really nothing to do with anti-Semitism except to serve as its targets—no more than the character of the "witches" had anything to do with witch-burning. Anti-Semitism exists among Christian Indians in Peruvian mountain villages where no Jew has ever been seen. Anti-

Semitism is a problem not of Jews, but of Christian mentality.

SO PHIL GREEN begins his pilgrimage into the lower depths of high-minded America. No sinister adventures befall him, there are no screams or shots or whips or blood. Every episode is a thrice-told tale; but, seen through Phil's eyes, they evoke the horror of unashamed inhumanity in broad daylight amid familiar scenes.

"Put yourself in his place," fair-minded Americans say—and *Gentleman's Agreement* does just this, literally and doggedly: the colleague's sneer at the luncheon table, the restricted apartment house, the jobs for Gentiles only, the drunken insult, the circles where one is "tolerated" and the genteel clubs and hotels and universities and neighborhoods where one is not, and the sharp, brutal rejection of my children by yours.

But the film's thrust goes deeper than mere exposé. Phil's "liberal" fiancée begins to falter under the burden of his "Jewishness" and its penalties—she has an upper-bracket sister in Darien; there is to be a party to celebrate their engagement; her anticipatory shrinking before her sister and her friends is tinged with fear and distaste for Phil's involvement; she is beginning to run away. She is put to the critical test when Phil's Jewish friend Dave turns up in New York, with a fine job ready for him if only he can find a house for his family. And Kathy has a house, a cottage she owns but has never lived in, in Darien's most desirable (and restricted) subdivision.

It is here that Kathy turns and fights. In a ringing speech of hurt and defiance—the film's finest scene—the deeper conflict is brilliantly revealed, and the drama broadens suddenly into a confrontation of the issue that is perhaps most central of all to the future of our democratic form of society. (It is an issue broader than anti-Semitism, though anti-Semitism has become—for good and sufficient reasons—one of its chief symbols.) Kathy says—and remember, she is the high-minded girl who suggested the series to her publisher uncle:

"It's no use Phil . . . you're doing an impossible thing. You are what you *are* for the one life you have—you can't help it if you were born Christian instead of Jewish. . . . It's a practical fact [like being good-looking instead of ugly], not a judgment that I'm superior. But I could never make *you* see that. You'd twist it into something horrible—a conniving, an abetting—the thing I loathe as much as you do. . . .

"Don't treat me to any more lessons in tolerance either. I'm sick of it. I'm not going to marry into hotheaded shouting and nerves and you might as well know it and know it now!"

Kathy's clean-scrubbed American loveliness and her good finishing-school English are a long distance from the German of the grubby tradesmen, school teachers, and civil servants whom our troops interrogated at the war's end. But their answers and hers have an ominous similarity: "What do you want of me? I am only a little man."

There, in this stormy lover's quarrel, is exposed the reef that, many think, can split our whole Western way of life. What can be expected of *me*—what can I expect of *myself*—I who am only one lone individual in a huge, buzzing, global industrial society, full of uncharted problems and unrighted wrongs? And it is the dramatic merit of *Gentleman's Agreement* that—as Kathy poses the question with almost siren-like persuasiveness—it faces us with a real dilemma, carrying sharp prongs either way. Dave's house and Dave's job and Dave's "kind," why is it not enough to sympathize, and pass it off with the right, progressive opinions and pamphlets and ten dollars to the right committee—after all, must we sacrifice our friends and "our kind"? One has but one life to live—"crusades" are not for us. What is the responsibility of the innocent bystander?

A NUMBER of writers for this magazine remember the answer of Rabbi Leo S. Baeck, survivor of the Theresienstadt concentration camp, to the inevitable question one of us asked him: "What was it about

the German people that made it possible for it to happen there?" "One thing above all," said Rabbi Baeck. "The Germans have never known what it means to be a citizen as you know it in England or France or America. They have never known what it means to have won the right, by conquest of the state, to say as an individual what a king once said: the state is I. In England and America, when the ultimate evil comes, instead of bowing the neck, the citizen stands up and finds the strength to say, 'This has gone far enough. . . . So far—no further!'"

Inevitably, we asked the second question, "Does that spirit of citizenship, in the old sense, still exist—could it happen in England, in America?"

"That the next decade will tell us," said Rabbi Baeck. "But I think it needn't happen here. Not if Americans remember what it is to be a citizen, and that means to know when to say 'yes' and when to say 'no'—especially the latter. . . ."

What grim, tenacious Phil learns is that to beat anti-Semitism we must fight not only the Gerald L. K. Smiths or the high-society anti-Semites, but the good, wholesome, liberal Kathies of the nation, not merely the actively evil, but the inactively good. And that—we also see—means struggling against—perhaps better say putting into their proper place—some of our most cherished present-day ideals and living patterns—among them, even that holy of holies, this nation's real shrine, that little white cottage called home.

Kathy fights like a tiger because she is fighting for her Home—meaning all the great, desirable things like security, family, comfort, children with "every advantage," flowered chintz, lovely china, a garden. . . . Say no to that? Who could or would? But is it only the obsessed who see something else growing, like the worm in the bud, as the Kew Heights, Chillington Manors, and Darlton Acres spread from coast to coast, not only for the rich, but "for families of modest means"—shelter for "our kind," but a fortress against the "others"?

If we are not careful, the American frontier might finally close in a new isolationism

— domestic and international — shade-grown in that quiet dead-end street in that charming subdivision (complete with restrictive covenants) just seventy-two minutes from Grand Central Station.

The battle of the next century, says *Gentleman's Agreement*, will be fought out in the homes of America. That is more than a Fourth of July orator's flourish. Extend it a bit to include churches and schools, and it is the plain truth.

Kathy *does* something. What she does, looked at soberly, is more than a little romantic and "impractical"—she lends her cottage to Dave. But symbolically it is sound. She does something that represents nuisance and bother in her own home, her own neighborhood. When it comes to anti-Semitism, says *Gentleman's Agreement*, we must work at it, not only with our aldermen and congressmen, but where it counts doubly—in the daily circumstances of our personal lives, one by one, individually.

TO THOSE who have had great dreams for the "cinema," the unreeling of *Gentleman's Agreement* holds a secondary drama. Once more, against the scoffers both inside and outside Hollywood, the film is attempting to show itself as something better than combination peep show and juke box. It has been a long drought since *Grapes of Wrath*—and it is exciting to see *Gentleman's Agreement* demonstrate once again that the medium is there, and the talent, too.

In the face of this picture's substantial achievement it would perhaps be churlish to point out that mature art is not yet there. Yet, though the makers of *Gentleman's Agreement* have a sure touch with emotions, they are highly insecure in their handling of ideas, non-typical personalities other than the most familiar, and milieux other than the stock backgrounds. Almost none of the secondary figures in *Gentleman's Agreement* is clearly conceived. Faced with a liberal publisher who is neither Edward Arnold nor Melvyn Douglas, the producers seem helpless; and the fashion editor, the Jewish scientist, the Jewish conservative, and Phil's col-

leagues on the magazine count for little more than confusion. And the party in Darien, the party at the publisher's, the fashion editor's apartment, the "sophisticated" conversations—well, there you see an art fumbling because it is neither practiced nor mature enough to know its way around much of America. But given twenty more good pictures, who can doubt that the story will be different?

To one Jew—and certainly to many others—the restraint, the thoughtful seriousness, the broadness of concept of *Gentleman's Agreement* are gratifying. Here is no sensational exploitation of anti-Semitism like *Crossfire*, mixed 98 per cent thrills and 2 per cent pious preaching. However sincere its aim, the melodrama *Crossfire* seemed misguided. It portrayed anti-Semitism in such extreme terms of drunken violence and viciousness as to evoke no identification in the great mass of decent Americans—and anti-Semitism is, unhappily, the problem first and foremost of decent middle-class people (and in America aren't we all middle-class, at least by identification?) of good, but passive will. And it is good, for more reasons than one, to see the Jew presented as in Dave Goldman—a little too stereotyped, to be sure, but in the image of strength rather than in that of the "poor Jew" scapegoat of *Crossfire*. And we like the fact that *Gentleman's Agreement* builds hopefully (and realistically) on American strength, where *Crossfire* seemed alarmist and defeatist.

Old-fashioned though it be, we confess a preference, when it comes to matters of public enlightenment, for the straightforward approach represented by *Gentleman's Agreement*. This film is amazingly free of the latter-day propagandist's bag-of-tricks.

Gentleman's Agreement is advertised for what it is; it respects itself and its audience's intelligence; and it has enough faith in what it has to say to risk saying it plainly and with some of its complications, rather than relying on shock, or trapping the unconscious, or sneaking up on its public from behind the ambush of soap opera dramas, fast-shooting detectives, noble hackdrivers, and the Kid Kourages of the comic books. It does not try to fight stereotypes with stereo-

types; or slogans with slogans. Whatever its shortcomings, it chooses the open road of thought and art. In a word, it is not manipulative. *Gentleman's Agreement* is a soberer picture than *Crossfire*, and it may lack its thrills, but in the end it is both less preachy and more convincing.

Sometimes I wonder whether fighters for good causes are as well advised as they suppose in putting aside the sound old tools of fact and eloquence and art for the ingenious propagandistic devices borrowed from the arsenal of those whose task—in mass-selling, in totalitarian politics, both of the Right and "Left," and in war—it has been to make the bad cause appear the better. If you have reality on your side, why not enlist as your ally your neighbor's own good sense of reality, using your art to sharpen that sense and to remind him, with the fullest possible impact, of his own experience, best judgment, and highest personal standards?

Would Czarist Russia have built Potemkin villages if it had had real ones? In the fight against anti-Semitism, in a country like our own where it is neither official nor respectable, one would hope that we could place less weight on the cute and the clever, and more on the frontal approach—made through the agencies and the "media" whose authority people respect in matters of serious concern to them. Comic books, laudable as they may be for other purposes, are not among these, I venture to say, nor are singing commercials.

OF COURSE, this picture—except for its suggestion of job competition—goes hardly at all into the *whys* of anti-Semitism. Jew-hatred is not purely mysterious. It exists for no *good* reasons, but there are reasons—social, economic, political—for its existence. Politically, anti-Semitism has vast destructiveness—it gave Hitler his chief leverage in his bid to destroy Western democratic society. For their own self-protection, Americans need to learn how it works.

If *Gentleman's Agreement* effectively drives home the social dimensions of anti-Semitism to a wide audience and points out a direction, this is perhaps contribution

enough for one film. We trust that future films—and novels, the radio, and journalism—will not content themselves with covering the same ground. Further exposés are not likely to be very useful; anti-Semitism hardly needs more publicity; and there are even dangers in repetitive advertising of the phenomenon, unless we add to the public's knowledge and insight into its mechanism and its role.

Failing to explain anti-Semitism, we may only underscore the "mystery" of the Jew which is its core; a half-dozen more films and a continuing spate of novels presenting the Jew merely as a problem in our society (and not as a normal part of its daily life) may only serve to further confirm his "alienness" and his dangerous out-group isolation.

We must begin to tell the whys. That we haven't is partly due to an underestimation of the intelligence of the American people—and of their allergic resistance to propaganda—plus premature adaptations of psychotherapeutic techniques to mass fields where their efficacy is, to say the least, unproved. In this country we have probably the best-informed population the globe has ever seen. It has a particular appetite for how-comes, wherefores, and reasons why.

Only the other day I heard a foreign scholar comment on the astonishing preoccupation with psychological mechanisms and human behavior he has noted in the conversation of ordinary Americans, whether the talk ran on sports, politics, or family problems. Some one has said that, judging by our national curiosity and scepticism, Missouri must be the native state of at least 80 per cent of our population. As a people, we love scientific explanations.

Today, in the wake of *Gentleman's Agreement*, there is the possibility of explaining anti-Semitism to countless receptive ears, and of talking causes—and cures. It is a great pity that we are not better prepared. For unless we deepen momentary interest through sounder knowledge, more intensive discussion, and programs of social action, we cannot hope to reach down into the core of the malady and alter attitudes. The roots of anti-Semitism are deep and tangled.

FILMS like *Gentleman's Agreement* represent only first steps. What do we do next? One wonders whether defense programs in the field of group hatred have not been focusing disproportionately on short-term emotional techniques designed for mass media—in which, incidentally, their means are quite inadequate for the enormous saturation needed to have them take effect, considering the competition for public attention. Not to speak of the fact that in using these techniques we may be adding our own mite to building up the stereotype-responding mass mind which, when the chips are down, is always the best resource of democracy's enemies. (But that is a longer story.)

Should we not be giving more emphasis to informing and enlightening those who shape attitudes on anti-Semitism in this country—editors, writers, teachers, the clergy, political, industrial, and labor leaders, thoughtful people generally?

Let us be sternly practical. A thousand ministers will be wanting to talk on anti-Semitism this month. Where is the small library of books (large and small) written on the level such men can respect—cogent, non-apologetic and non-propagandistic, authentically scientific—making clear to them the origins and meaning of anti-Semitism and the place of the Jew in America today? What would you give to an editor who wanted to read up on the subject? To the director of a national radio forum, or the program secretary of a national federation of clubwomen? To a social science professor for an undergraduate seminar? Yes, education is slow. But what is faster? Happily, the enemy is not now at the gates, there is still time. It is later than we think. But it is earlier than we fear.

Now, for a ticklish matter. This week some thousands of Gentiles—the subject is in the air—will be asking Jewish acquaintances for light on anti-Semitism, in the car on the way home from the Community Chest luncheon, over the cigars after that business deal. Isn't Mr. Glantzberg a Jewish leader—surely *he* knows. Does he? This writer has been bewildered at the lack of knowledge of the simplest facts about anti-Semitism—

much less its causes or how best to fight it—which he has heard exhibited by Jewish community leaders who could have told you to the last nickel the cost of a new 1,000,000-volt X-ray machine for the Beth Solomon Hospital, or to the last dunam the amount of land bought by the Jewish National Fund in the past year.

We have heard admissions made—supposedly out of “fairness”—of the partial responsibility of Jews for this or that phase of anti-Semitism that hadn’t a factual toe to stand on; and we have heard exaggerations, old-wives’ tales, unconscious distortions of Jewish and American history and experience, parroted ideologies, and sheer ignorance and prejudice parading as seasoned wisdom and Jewish policy, world without end. When do we start educating the Jews? For the sake of their own self-respect and peace of mind, and for the sake of their fellow-Jews, whom they presumably lead. Also, you can never tell when a Gentile may ask a serious question.

IT WILL not seem ungracious, one hopes, to take issue with *Gentleman’s Agreement* on two points where insufficient knowledge seems to have misled its makers.

The picture displays a Jewish leader who belongs to an organization that believes in “hush-hush” on the problem of anti-Semitism. This writer knows some Jewish individuals, but no organization that stands for such a policy. As far as we know, all have welcomed the film-makers into the struggle, and have tactfully refrained from making the kind of quips that traditionally greet the last fire engine at the four-alarm fire. On the other hand, Jewish organizations—not one or two, but most—do question the wisdom of mere hullabaloo as applied to certain phases of anti-Semitic activity. For example, they oppose mass picketing or breaking up fascist demagogue meetings, as practised by the Communists; they believe such action strengthens rather than halts today’s feeble

and publicity-starved hate groups. Recent events have proved the quarantine strategy correct.

Another shortcoming is the way in which the picture plays down the real differences involved in American group life. Often it seems to be saying: “Be tolerant; after all, we are all exactly alike.” The converse would seem to be that if we weren’t, one would not need to be tolerant.

To make tolerance conditional on uniformity is risky for groups, and for America, too. It is not a matter of flag or nationality; and none of us wants “national minorities.” We are all Americans. But to most Jews being Jewish is more than being religious in the creedal sense, or standing one’s ground negatively against anti-Semitism. Dave is visibly different from Phil, as you can see in the picture; his son, too, will be noticeably different from Phil’s. There is a richness, variety, and value in group life that the “no difference” formula overlooks.

We will be a less tolerant and a poorer country unless we learn not only to permit but to prize the variety and values of American people who don’t normally appear in the ads—the Irishman, the Pole, the Italian, the Seventh Avenue dress manufacturer and the bearded Orthodox rabbi, the men of other eye-slants and skin colors.

America, if I read the old documents aright, was not meant to be a country club for people “just like us.” The “exclusiveness” of the gentleman’s agreement, collusive or legal, was no part of the picture; nor was the genteel pattern, native or acquired, the prescribed ticket of admission. It was to be a free land for all kinds of people.

In *Democratic Vistas*, perhaps the most timely of all American books for our present dilemmas, Walt Whitman said: “The common ambition strains for elevation, to become some privileged exclusive. The master sees greatness and health in being part of the mass; nothing will do as well as common ground.”